

Communion Service Sunday 7th June – led by Martyn Macphee



*It's always a pleasure to have Martyn lead our worship. His reflection was entitled "Sinners All", but it might equally have had the title "**Jesus and the Wrong Company**" because as he was preparing Martyn had found myself thinking about his years in investment banking and about the kind of leadership that the world often admired.*

Martyn gave us the example of Jack Welch, the former chief executive of General Electric, a man famous for his forceful style and uncompromising approach to management. He had been brilliant, successful, and deeply influential, but he'd represented a model of leadership built on efficiency, advantage, and hard decisions. By that standard, Jesus would never have made a successful corporate CEO. He'd spent his time with the wrong people, ignored the accepted routes to influence, and he'd shown little interest in cultivating the powerful.

And that was exactly what we'd heard in the reading from Matthew's Gospel, where Jesus had been criticised for eating with tax collectors and sinners. In every age, people tended to look down on certain professions or kinds of people, and tax collectors in Jesus' day were among the most despised. They were seen not only as agents of an oppressive system, but also as people who profited from it. If Jesus had wanted to build his reputation in the conventional way, he would have courted the influential religious leaders in Jerusalem. Instead, he'd chosen the company of those regarded as morally suspect and socially unacceptable.

Matthew was most likely sitting in Capernaum, a busy town positioned on an important trade route and near a territorial boundary, making it an ideal place for collecting tolls and customs. Matthew was not simply a clerk; he was part of a profitable, highly visible system. He would have had all the tools of his trade before him, collecting money from travellers and merchants, and almost certainly benefiting from a system everyone resented but understood. People might have despised tax collectors, but tax collectors were often doing very well for themselves.

Into that scene Jesus had walked and simply said, "Follow me." There had been no lengthy argument and no moral lecture. Matthew had left his booth and followed Jesus. Then he'd invited Jesus to dinner and brought along his friends and associates—the very people respectable society would rather have avoided. Jesus had deliberately placed himself in their company. From a worldly point of view, it was a disastrous strategy. From the point of view of the kingdom of God, it revealed the heart of his ministry.

By this point in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus had already been in trouble—not because his teaching was obviously unorthodox, but because of the company he'd kept. He was not following the expected script - building alliances with the respectable and powerful. He was spending time with sinners, and that had offended the religious leaders.

The point of the story was not simply that Matthew was a sinner; it was that we all were. We were all in the same boat, and every one of us carried that same label before God. Yet the good news was that God's love was not reserved for the respectable, the polished, or the apparently qualified. God loved everyone—those inside the church and those outside it, those who behaved as we thought they should, and those who did not.

Martyn was reminded of a story about a courtroom in which the call was not "All rise," but "All debtors rise." In a sense, that was exactly what happened whenever we gathered before God. We came as debtors: people who lived not on our own righteousness, but on mercy. God wiped the ledger clean. He forgave our debts. And yet, like people who clear one account only to run it up again, we continued to fall short. One might think that such indebtedness would disqualify us from following Jesus, but the story showed the opposite. Jesus had called the unqualified. He'd called people like Matthew, and therefore people like us.

Following Jesus was not grounded in our competence, but in his grace. He had full authority yet did not use it to condemn. He used it to bless, to show compassion, and to open a path for us. This was why the language of debt in the Lord's Prayer mattered so much. We prayed for forgiveness because we needed it, and we asked for the grace to extend that same forgiveness to others.

So here was the good news: Jesus was willing to keep company with us. More than that, he chose to do so. He didn't wait for us to become impressive, respectable, or spiritually polished. He'd come to us in our need and offer forgiveness. That was the heart of the gospel.

And so our prayer should be simple and honest: Father, forgive us our debts, and give us the courage and generosity to forgive the debts of others. Keep company with us, Lord, we pray, in Jesus' name.